

Ethnicity as a tool of political violence: a case study of the North Rift, 1992-2009

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Abstract:

The focus of this study was to examine how ethnicity was used as a tool of political violence in the North Rift of Kenya. Although North Rift comprises of nine districts namely Uasin Gishu, Turkana, Trans Nzoia, Nandi, Keiyo, Marakwet, East Pokot, North Pokot and West Pokot , three districts, namely Uasin Gishu District (Ainabkoi Administrative Division), Trans Nzoia District (Cherangany and Saboti Administrative divisions), and Nandi District (Kipkaren and Tinderet Administrative divisions) were chosen. These areas were a hotbed of politically instigated violence during the general election period between 1992 and 2009. The study posits that, ethnicity was used as a tool of political violence in the targeted districts. It argues that ethnicity stems back to the period of migration and settlement. After settlement communities interacted either through peaceful means or conflicting relations. Ethnicity was intensified by the British colonial administration which displaced some 'perceived' indigenous communities in order to create room for the White Settlers. The settlers required labour which the displaced Africans were not willing to offer. The Colonial administration therefore was determined to force the Africans to work on these farms by putting into place laws that would ensure this was done. Africans from different communities were therefore forced to seek employment on the created 'White Highlands'. These immigrants seeking employment were to remain in the region after the colonial rule leading to competition over resources such as land. Ethnic violence broke out in 1991 prior to the 1992 multiparty general election and the subsequent elections because of political incitement. The politicians used the resource factor to mobilize their people against other communities hence leading to the violence that was experienced in the region. It is contended that the political urge for the federal system of government to counter the call for multi-party system of government featured prominently in the North Rift political campaigns. Finally, the study shows that the conflict in the North Rift impacted on all areas of human life. There was disruption of the social, political and economic fabric of communities living in the region. The impact varied from loss of lives, displacement of thousands of people to destruction of property of great value.